

SM 18-65

Soviet Tactics Concerning Vietnam

15 July 1965

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

15 July 1965

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 13-65

SUBJECT: Soviet Tactics Concerning Vietnam

SUMMARY

The new Soviet-DRV economic and military aid agreement implies a stepup in Soviet arms shipments and will have the effect of deepening the Soviet commitment in Vietnam. Partly in order to contain the risks of this commitment, the USSR has of late intensified private approaches to the US, indicating continued interest in a negotiated settlement. At the same time, it has threatened in low key to make trouble in Berlin if the US remains unyielding in Vietnam. We believe that this combination of tactics is intended to deter further US escalation in Vietnam. It is also meant to prepare for the time when negotiations might become feasible and, the USSR can play a larger role in Vietnam.

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1. The USSR seems to have agreed to step up its arms shipments to the DRV. As announced by Hanoi on 12 July, a new economic and military aid agreement was recently signed in Moscow; among other things, it calls for the "strengthening of the DRV's national defense potential" and specifies the additional aid to be provided.

2. The signing of this agreement followed a month or more of public Soviet hints that something of this nature was impending. Departing from the usual formula on the subject, Pravda in mid-June, for example, declared that the USSR would give "the DRV government and the republic's armed forces all the assistance considered necessary by the DRV for the defense of the achievements of peoples rule and the repulse of aggression."

3. The Chinese seem to have agreed to the transshipment of additional Soviet arms. The Soviet ambassador in Peiping, for example, is reported to have told the Cambodian ambassador that China had recently given its agreement to let the USSR transport war material destined for North Vietnam across China. Similar statements have been attributed to other Soviet sources. Moscow's recent public emphasis on the failure of the Chinese to coordinate their Vietnamese policies with the Soviets suggests, however, that a permanent solution to the transshipment problem has yet to be found.

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The New Soviet Aid

4. The extent of Soviet military aid program for the DRV is not, of course, spelled out in announcements of the new agreement, and it is not entirely clear to us what the Soviets have in mind. In general, however, we think the Soviets are likely to provide weapons of an essentially defensive nature. Specifically, under the terms of the new agreement, we think further deliveries of Soviet air defense equipment are likely: SAMs, AAA, radar, and fighters. The SAM system will probably be extended to cover more than the Hanoi area.

5. The USSR apparently agreed last spring to strengthen the DRV's coastal defenses; thus far, it does not seem to have done so. The new agreement may spell out this commitment, and for example, provide for the strengthening of the MTB fleet and perhaps the delivery of Komar missile boats and coastal defense missiles.

6. It is possible that more IL-28's will be delivered. The lack of a specific response to the delivery of eight of these aircraft in late May, together with the public airing of the issue in the US, may have convinced the USSR and the DRV that more of these aircraft could be safely delivered.

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Soviet Approaches to the US

7. While increasing their involvement in the Vietnamese crisis, the Soviets have made it a point to keep in touch with the US. Gromyko told Ambassador Kohler in Moscow last month that it was "fundamental Soviet policy" to seek an improvement in US-Soviet relations. He also seemed to say that further overtures to the DRV should be made. Kosygin, in rejecting the British Commonwealth mission, was careful not to rule out negotiating and merely disclaimed any authorization to negotiate for the DRV or Viet Cong. A Soviet official in Vienna, who expected that his remarks would reach Washington, claimed on 1 July that his government foresaw an armistice as a possible basis for Vietnam negotiations. Most recently, the Soviets have agreed to early resumption of disarmament talks in Geneva, abandoning the line that Vietnam made such talks useless. This could have symbolic import as the first positive Soviet move in East-West relations after many months of deterioration.

8. In addition to these approaches, Ambassador Kohler has reported that on 27 June a Soviet official, privy to high level policy, told one of Kohler's diplomatic colleagues that the US and USSR had the same strategic aim in Southeast Asia -- to prevent the area from falling under Chinese domination. He said the most

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feasible solution would be an independent, neutralized Vietnam, guaranteed by the US and USSR as in Laos. He added that negotiations were exceedingly difficult for the Soviets because they could not be kept secret and, if they become known, the Chinese would lambaste the Soviets for a sellout.

9. But this same Soviet official also stated that the policy choices for the USSR were becoming increasingly painful; if the situation continues along present lines, he said, the Soviets would be forced to "counterattack" in the area of the greatest US vulnerability, Germany. This pointedly declared warning is the first of its kind. Previous East German moves affecting West Berlin might have been partly intended to convey the same warning, though Soviet officials on the scene disavowed any intention of creating another Berlin crisis.

10. We continue to think that the Soviets want to avoid sharp crises on two fronts simultaneously. The new leaders have shown themselves willing, however, to put some pressure on West Berlin while the war continues in Vietnam. We believe that they will further develop the line that the US faces trouble in Berlin

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if it remains unyielding in Vietnam, perhaps underscoring it from time to time with controlled harassments falling short of a major challenge to the Allied position there.

11. All these recent Soviet moves, in our view, illustrate and are explained by the major dilemmas of Soviet policy. The USSR naturally desires the victory of communism in Vietnam, yet it does not want to see such a victory as would magnify the prestige and power of Communist China. At the same time, in the circumstances of the Sino-Soviet controversy Moscow cannot afford to appear laggard in supporting the DRV and the Viet Cong. Yet it is highly apprehensive of the consequences of expanded war in the Far East, a major military confrontation between the US and Communist China, and the extremely dangerous world crisis that would result therefrom. Finally, the situation is one over which Moscow has little control; it cannot manage the DRV, or the Chinese Communists, or the US.

12. The feasible options open to Moscow are thus limited and unsatisfactory. It is giving more aid to North Vietnam because practically speaking, it cannot avoid giving such aid and because it wishes to strengthen its presence and influence in Hanoi.

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It is putting some pressure on the US through low-keyed threats about Berlin. Yet it is also keeping open its lines of communication with the US, endeavoring somewhat to soften the crisis, to keep alive the possibilities of negotiation at some future time, and to persuade the US not to carry military operations to a degree of extreme severity. We continue to believe that the Soviets desire a negotiated settlement, because such a settlement would bring least profit to the Chinese, would dampen the dangers of extended war, and yet would not necessarily surrender Communist objectives in Vietnam. At the moment there is little the Soviets can do to bring about negotiation. They can only temporize, and lay what foundations they may for the time when negotiations become feasible and they can hope to influence them.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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